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UNCLAS MADRID 000433

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SUBJECT: BASQUE LEADER CALLS EARLY ELECTIONS AFTER
PARLIAMENT REJECTS AUTONOMY PLAN

REF: MADRID 344

1. On February 1, the Spanish National Parliament decisively rejected Plan Ibarretxe, the Basque proposal for reform of the GOS-Basque autonomy statute. (See reftel). After a marathon debate, the Basque proposal was voted down 313 to 29. The Socialists, Popular Party and other national parties opposed Plan Ibarretxe, which only drew the support of small regional parties, including the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV).

2. On February 2, an extraordinary session of the Basque Parliament was convened in which Ibarretxe called for new elections for the Basque Regional Parliament. The elections have been set for April 17, approximately three weeks earlier than previously scheduled. Ibarretxe denied that the vote is intended as a "virtual referendum," but he clearly intends to win a majority for the PNV in the Basque Parliament by stoking Basque nationalist sentiment. Ibarretxe also publicly requested that Batasuna, ETA's political wing, be allowed to participate in the April elections. The GOS rejected any participation by Batasuna or other ETA front groups.

3. Comment. Both the rejection of Plan Ibarretxe in the National Parliament and the subsequent call for new Basque elections came as no surprise. The key unknown factor is how far Ibarretxe is willing to go in carrying out what would now be an illegal referendum on Basque autonomy. Despite any new developments in the Basque Region, the GOS and the majority of the Spanish public will continue to oppose significant revision of the autonomy statutes. End Comment.
MANZANARES